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ABSTRACT

In recent years, theatre faculty have come to understand that advanced degrees do not guarantee that a person is qualified for the subtle, complex, and dangerous job of teaching acting, and that actor training has more to do with the problems of human behavior than with the theatre. The fundamental problem with acting is the fear that controls human behavior. Theatre faculty should reach beyond theatre to the human behavior sciences for training techniques that can help students cast off this fear, free their imaginations and learn the skills of self knowledge and perception. Unfortunately, most graduate theatre programs are either unable or not inclined to prepare teachers for this new work, and many of the most valuable new techniques drawn from psychology and therapy are dangerous in the hands of anyone not fully trained. Such teaching is better viewed as intervention (any interaction with another in order to change the other's behavior or attitudes) than as therapy. For any intervention, the instructor must know (1) what the specific intended impact of the intervention is, (2) the psychic or somatic mechanisms by which the intervention is expected to work, (3) any particular dangers posed by the technique, and (4) how to judge the actual impact of the intervention. Acting teachers must, in effect, become psychologists. What is needed is a thoughtful outline of a course of study for acting teachers and a full research bibliography of sources in the burgeoning territory of the sciences and technologies of human behavior. (HTH)

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THE PROMISE OF THE NEW ACTOR TRAINING—A PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGE FOR TEACHERS

by

Roger Gross

We have good news and bad news. Two very good things have happened to actor training in recent years. 1. We now seem to understand that the PhD in no way guarantees that a person is qualified for the subtle, complex, and dangerous job of teaching acting. This is a very important realization; we may wonder why it was so long coming. It is true that we immediately fell into an equally naive belief that any professional actor or anyone with an MFA in acting is qualified for the job, but we seem to have recovered from that slip rather quickly. We now see that what one needs to know to act or to direct well and what one needs to know to teach acting well are two very different things. Clearly, the qualifications of the acting teacher are very special. 2. We also seem to have grasped that actor training has very little to do, directly, with the theatre. What we do to make fine actors of ourselves has very little to do with the tricks and traditions of the theatre and much to do with the fundamental problems of human behavior: of social adjustment, of cognitive and affective skills.

The fundamental problem of acting is fear. Nothing so trivial as stagefright; that is easy to handle. I mean the deep-seated fears which control our behavior, even though we tend to deny their existence. This fear is the ultimate source of every problem I encounter in actors: imaginative problems, expressive problems, and even problems of interpretation. Fear inhibits imagination and creativity, distracts us from our character fantasy, and makes rigid puppets of our bodies.

But this is not uniquely a theatrical problem. Fear is the fundamental human problem. It is the price we pay for consciousness and for our power of imagination,

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our flexibility and our ability to conceive alternative possibilities. Acting simply presents us with a heightened instance of the basic problem of being on-the-spot, vulnerable, and unsure.

We have learned this lesson. We now understand that, if we are to really help our students, we must reach far beyond theatre for our training techniques. Our job is not to teach how-to-act so much as it is to help students become the kind of free and aware people who can act. We must help them cast off their fears, free their bodies and their imagination, and learn all the skills of self-knowledge, self-control, and perception which are so inhibited by fear and by the ego-trap which fear generates.

If we are able to do this responsibly and effectively, we are going to have to go to the experts in the fundamental sciences and technologies of human behavior for our information, our tools, and our skills.

I have a very important sign on my classroom wall. It reads: "You can't make theatre out of theatre." The good news is that this idea is more widely understood every year. Theatre people are reaching out. They are adventuring in territories we didn't even know existed ten or fifteen years ago, and they are bringing back treasures which promise to redeem the inadequacies of our earlier approaches to actor training. Which brings me to the bad news.

This new type of training presents us with two major problems: 1. Most of our graduate programs are not able to prepare teachers for this new work, or, if able, not so inclined. After all, faculty schedules now are full. Who, in our area is able and free to teach the broad range of special courses required by the new approach? And if we are able and free, what are we to trim from the student's program to make room for the new material? History? Literature? Theory and Criticism? Directing? Any such suggestions are sure to provoke lively warfare. Clearly, some major changes will have to be made in our graduate training, but it won't happen soon, particularly

in this time of financial exigency. For the time being, it seems that acting teachers will have to train themselves. They will have to travel far and spend lots of time and money to do it. 2. Many of the most valuable new techniques are dangerous in the hands of anyone not fully trained. This concern has been particularly intense for some of the most productive new techniques because they are drawn from the psychological therapies. The ideas of psychology and therapy both create a lot of apprehension in the trade, and unfortunately, many acting teachers have justified the apprehension by careless and under-informed use of the techniques.

Obviously we need some sort of professional standard for the educational use of potentially dangerous techniques. My intent here is to initiate a dialogue on the subject with the hope that it may lead us to fully articulated and generally accepted standards for more responsible and productive use of these valuable new tools.

To begin, let us completely cast off the notion of "therapeutic techniques," of techniques which belong, properly, to some other discipline and which produce given therapeutic effects. It is too narrow and deceptive. You may be surprised to learn that therapists hardly ever use it because they know that it is neither feasible nor meaningful to separate human transactions cleanly into those which are therapeutic and those which are not. Therapy is the conscious effort to help in the remedy of some perceived dysfunction, psychic or somatic. Any transaction may be therapeutic just as any transaction may be destructive. The impact of any transaction depends not only on what is done but by whom, to whom, and in what manner, when, and in what circumstances.

So cast off the notion of therapeutic techniques and adopt instead the concept therapists find most useful: the idea of "intervention." Any time one of us interacts with another in order to change the other's behavior, beliefs, attitudes, he is intervening in that other's life and so incurs a responsibility which must not be borne carelessly.

But can such a broad view be useful? So conceived, intervention includes all teaching and all directing. Right! The same dangers apply, potentially, in all of our interventions. Admittedly, affective and physiological interventions present the threat of more immediate and debilitating damage than do cognitive interventions. But this is complicated even more by two facts: what is intended as cognitive intervention may well have high affective and physiological impact instead, or as well. Also we may actually intervene without intending to. Passive intervention or intervention by omission may be as potent as the most aggressive, demanding intervention. In other words, it is a touchy game. When we set ourselves up in positions of high power and influence, such as teaching or directing, we had better understand that we are walking on eggs and must tread gently and knowledgeably.

Recall that in the Hippocratic Oath, to which physicians still swear, one of the most significant promises is that, above all, the doctor's intervention will do no harm. The problem is so real that they have given it a name: iatrogenic illness: illness caused by the intended cure. This oath takes priority over the possibility of helping. So it should with us. The standard should apply to all our behavior with students, from using the Bioenergetic stress positions to the look we give the students as we pass in the hall, from the memory of emotion exercise to the request that an actor speak louder.

Every intervention is potentially valuable and potentially destructive; which impact it actually has will depend on our skill. Of course, no amount of skill can guarantee that we will never do harm. We will make mistakes. We will be destructive. But we must do what can be done to minimize the risk.

Here is a first effort to articulate the sort of standard I am calling for. The crucial requirements are knowledge and perceptual skill, sensitivity, that

is, to the impact of our interventions. Both are hard to come by; the knowledge because of its bulk and the perceptual skill because of its complexity and subtlety.

The following are minimum requirements. For any intervention we must know: 1. what the specific intended impact of the intervention is (we allow ourselves no vaguely conceived techniques which seem generally good; they are taboo both pedagogically and ethically), 2. the physic and/or somatic mechanisms by which the intervention is expected to work, 3. any particular dangers of the technique, and 4. how to judge the actual impact of the intervention (often the hardest part of all, and the most important).

That is a tall order. It takes an overwhelmingly bulky and rigorous education to bring us up to this minimum standard and it prohibits us from trying many of the most appealing new tools as soon as we would like. This standard tells the director that, for instance, he must not call for more volume from an actor unless he knows how this greater volume may be produced and unless his ear is trained to recognize any potentially damaging errors in voice production the actor may make in response.

The demon in this story is *routine*. It subverts our best intentions. I believe that routine does more damage than anything else to our actor training and to the reputability of our profession. *Any technique is a routine for you if you fail to meet any of the minimum requirements of understanding and perception just listed and/or: 1. if you allow yourself to fall into the unreasonable belief that any particular technique is, in itself, good or bad, useful or not, or 2. if you believe that any technique has a particular, guaranteed impact, forgetting that the impact of any transaction is a function of all parties involved, of the time, manner, and situation.*

There should be no set syllabus for actor training. Goals, yes; a repertoire of techniques, yes; but each student must be seen uniquely and techniques selected

according to that specific student's needs with the utmost perspicacity. Anything less seems to me to be routine, both unproductive and dangerous.

When we go to a convention workshop in bioenergetic technique and, after 45 minutes of necessarily incomplete demonstration, run home to use the techniques in our classrooms, we doom ourselves to routine and our students to worse. When we participate in a weekend workshop in theatre games and learn all of the games but none of the mechanisms by which they purportedly do their work or their likely impacts, and then integrate these games into our classes, we are perpetuators of routine. If we read Oscar Icazo's *Psychocalesthenics* and use them in class without a full knowledge of the underlying physiological mechanisms and tolerances and purposes, we are trapped in routine. If our understanding of acting comes from what we have learned on the stage and from acting textbooks, then we are routine teachers. In these cases, our students are helpless pawns in the hands of teachers who want to do their learning on the job by trial and error. At best, the student will have fun and learn a little. At worst, the student may be maimed psychologically or physically. It has happened.

We must not settle for new routines, but neither may we evade the problem by sticking with old, supposedly-safer routines. First, because they too present risks and require more knowledge than we have admitted, and then because they just do not do the job adequately. We have the new techniques. We know what, potentially, they can do: they can make actor training, for the first time, a truly productive effort for all students involved; they can free us from the urge to confess that "acting really can't be taught". (This confession has always seemed to me to be a sure sign that the confessing teacher was unprepared for the job and did not intend to become prepared. I believe in "born actors" as little as I believe in "born saints" and "born sinners". I think that anyone who has studied learning theory and developmental psychology will agree. Give us enough

time and a truly motivated student and we can make an actor of any normal person. Time, of course, is the crux. Time and adequate teacher preparation.)

So, we must not turn away from the promise of the new actor training, and the risks come with the territory. The challenge has been put to this generation of acting teachers. Now we will see what we are made of. The burden of self-re-education will be tremendous in time, effort, and money. My time with Alexander Lowen, the top man in bioenergetics, cost me $60 an hour. My Alexander Technique work was moderate: only $25 an hour. T'ai Chi Ch'uan was a bargain at $20 an hour. All are essential, and this is just a beginning. There are anatomy, physiology, kinesiology, first aid, CPR, speech science, neurobiology, kinesics, proximics, semantics, etcetera, etcetera. Repeat: all essential. Essential because, as acting teachers, we presume to tinker with people's bodies and minds at a profound level. This is not business for dilettantes.

Finally, just a few words about the specific obligations thrust upon us by our emotional and imaginative work. Remember that actors and acting students are put in a very vulnerable position; the very nature of their work places them under tremendous pressure. In such a situation, any normal human being is likely to tighten up, to defend, to hide, to mask. But we ask them to give up all defenses, to yield to the rush of emotion, to forget the threat of a judgmental audience. Now that is a truly stressful situation. We must be qualified and committed to keeping that situation under adequate control.

In the classroom, we have at least these two obligations: 1. We must not emotionally damage our students; we must be able, at every moment, to gauge the emotional impact of our work. 2. Since effective acting requires certain kinds of emotional health and freedom, we must be able to diagnose emotional dysfunction, to help when the problem lies within our competence, and to refer students, know-

ledgeably, to the proper experts when the problems go beyond our skills. We must do these things with exquisite tact and under the same obligations of confidentiality we expect of doctors, lawyers, and priests. And, like these professionals, we may not decline the enormous burden which falls upon those who intervene; we may not evade by confessing that we are not qualified. If we lack such knowledge and skill, we must get it, or we must stop calling ourselves acting teachers.

This means that we must, in a sense, become psychologists. This may sound outrageous, but I believe it. We must know what is known about human emotion, its expression, and its impacts on our lives. This much is minimal.

Your Erroneous Zones, *Born to Win*, *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am*, and *How to Get Control of Your Life and Time* are useful, even necessary, but nowhere near sufficient. They are baby steps. More like it are the monumental work by Carroll Izard, *Human Emotions*, and the seven amazing volumes by Alexander Lowen, the marvelous works by Ekman and Friesen on emotional expression, Silvano Arieti's basic *Creativity; the Magic Snythesis*, Manfred Clynes' *Sentics*, etcetera.

If I tried even to list the books I think you should read and the masters with whom you should study, this would be a book, not an article. So I will stop listing now. It is clear that one of our most urgent needs is for a thoughtful outline of a course of study for acting teachers, for fully researched bibliographies of those new territories, for lists of master teachers for anything which can lead us beyond the narrow limits of theatre proper into the huge and burgeoning territory of the sciences and technologies of human behavior. We need a sort of *Whole Earth Catalog* for acting teachers, and we need it soon.

I put it to you, acting teachers: you elected one of the world's most difficult, dangerous, and noble professions. Your potential contribution to human growth is tremendous and so is the effort and care you will have to expend if you are to do the job honorably.

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